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Abstract

This paper seeks to explore how a group of children, the majority of whom were of minority ethnic heritage, experienced starting nursery school in a setting where the majority of staff were of white indigenous-heritage. Observations were carried out over a two year period using an ethnographic approach. Using critical perspectives, drawn from the sociology of childhood, postmodernism and critical psychology, questions are raised about many seemingly taken for granted practices in early childhood education, which the staff saw as offering legitimate participation to all of the children, but which seemed to marginalise all but a small group of largely white girls. The paper ends with a consideration of how early childhood educators need to re-examine existing beliefs from multiple cultural perspectives in order to reduce marginalisation and discrimination.

Key words

Ethnicity; early childhood education; participation; professional implications

Introduction

This paper has its origins in research carried out as part of my doctoral studies (see also Barron, 2007 and Jones and Barron, 2007). It seeks to explore the experiences of starting nursery for a group of children, the majority of whom were of Pakistani-heritage, in a setting where the majority of staff were of white-indigenous origin. The paper explores how the environment that was created, the structural organisation of the nursery sessions and the activities and provision that were offered to the children appeared to be experienced by the children. In so doing, questions are raised about many seemingly taken for granted practices in early childhood education and the ways in which they can be seen, perhaps unwittingly, to marginalise particular groups of children.

The first part of the paper seeks to explore the methodological approach that underpinned the study. The discussion then focuses on the ways in which the methodological approach framed my experiences and interpretation of what emerged. In seeking to examine the practices of the nursery and the children's responses to them, Lave and Wenger's (1991) notion of legitimate participation and Wenger's (1998) work on communities of practice are used to shed light on and to theorise what was observed. The final part of the paper considers whether there are wider implications of the study for early childhood provision more generally

Methodological approach

The study was ethnographic in nature and fieldwork was carried out in a small town in the North-West of England. A group of three year old children were first visited and observed at home just before they started nursery school. Visiting the children at home was intended to enable me to understand something of the children's homes and prior experiences (see also Barron, 2007) and to use this understanding in observing how they responded to experiences in the nursery. Three-quarters of the children were of Pakistani-heritage and the rest of white-indigenous origin. The nursery school, by contrast, was staffed by a team that was entirely female and where three-quarters were of white-indigenous heritage. The remainder of the staff were of Pakistani-heritage and spoke Punjabi and some Urdu as well as English. The homes of thirty-two children were visited in August 2004 and the same number again in August 2005. Subsequently, the children were observed in the nursery school itself. A week was spent in the nursery in early September 2004 and 2005, observing the children as they settled into the nursery and recording my findings as field notes. Further observations and interviews with staff were carried out in November and December 2004 and 2005 when the nursery was celebrating Eid and Christmas. Observations of everyday nursery activities then followed in January, February, March, April and June 2006. Such an approach finds support in the work of Corsaro and Molinari (2000) who argue that 'ethnography is an ideal methodparticularly when it aims to both document children's evolving membership in their culture

(Lave and Wenger 1991) and when focused on key transition points in children's lives' (180).

In seeking to consider the meanings that emerged from the study, it is important also to explore how my position related to that of the staff of the nursery school. Unusually for a man in the world of early childhood education, I had previously been the head teacher of the school for four years, leaving in 1997 and this influenced my relationship with the setting. On the one hand, the time lapse gave me some distance from the nursery, its staff (some of whom were new to me and me to them) and its practices and helped me to 'make the familiar strange' (Gordon et al, 2001, 188); on the other, it gave a degree of familiarity on both sides. This insider / outsider role was a key part of the research experience. For example, on leaving the children's houses at the end of the home visits, they would ask for my 'verdict' if they had any concerns about the children. I was also invited to be present during staff meetings and would suddenly be asked to talk about what I had observed and whether I could tell them if they were 'doing anything wrong'. The insider / outsider role resulted in a tension between my previous role as head teacher, with a commitment at that time to the perceived 'truths' of child development and of Western child-centred education and my new critical perspectives on children and childhood, as an academic, which the staff knew nothing about, drawn from critical psychology (Walkerdine, 2002; Burman, 2008), the sociology of childhood (James and Prout, 1997; Corsaro, 2005) and postmodernism (Foucault, 1998, 2002). Thus, I found that whilst I was trying, as an ethnographer, to reserve judgment and to consider alternative readings, this proved difficult because of how the staff viewed me. They seemed to see me as an expert in all matters relating to early childhood, much in the way that Hammersley and Atkinson (1995) note. In short, the staff continued to hold a view of children, childhood and early childhood education that 'suggests that there is a universal state that we should all be striving for which is based on western notions of doing and knowing' (Yelland and Kilderry, 2005, 5), and wanted me to help in their quest, whilst I occupied a world of much less certainty.

Experiences and influences from home

The visits to the children's homes were important in allowing me to understand something of the children's experiences prior to and outside their attendance at the nursery school. Most families of Pakistani-heritage spoke Punjabi and so the visits were generally undertaken with a bilingual member of staff. There were some homes where the father mostly spoke English and the mother Punjabi and a few where the reverse was true. Where there were older school-aged children, they often spoke to each other in English. Virtually all of the children lived in small terraced houses close to the nursery school. It seemed from the visits that in many homes of families of Pakistani-heritage, Islam was a particularly significant influence, being visible in art work, ornaments and objects. In many, large text extracts from the Qu'ran were either framed or pinned directly to walls. There were also some signs of diaspora with, for example, in one home, a cuckoo clock on the wall, decorated with Arabic text that subsequently played 'There's no place like home'. Religion appeared explicitly in only one white home, where there were bibles on a book case and crosses on doors. The majority of mothers of Pakistani-heritage did not work outside the home (though a small number were students and one a college lecturer), whilst the fathers generally worked in small family businesses, as taxi or delivery drivers, takeaway chefs or in clothing firms (again a small number were students and one a college lecturer). The small number of white fathers in the main worked in unskilled manual jobs, whilst the mothers generally had part-time employment in local shops or did not work outside the home. The above is intended to provide an overview of the contextual information that was in my mind as I observed the children in the nursery. A fuller discussion of the findings relating to the home visits can be found in Barron (2007).

Examining experiences of early childhood education in the nursery school

When the children first started at the nursery school, I observed how they responded to the environment that had been created for them. They all

faced significant differences in the scale and size of the open-plan nursery when compared with the relatively small, predominantly terraced homes that most of them lived in. The environment they entered, in which all members of staff were female, was also not typical of the experiences of the majority of the children at home. Evidence from my visits to the children's homes suggested that many homes of those of Pakistani-heritage contained large extracts of text from the Qu'ran, whilst the white homes had relatively little print. In the nursery, this meant that the children of Pakistani-heritage experienced a great deal less text in comparison with their homes and what little there was did not reflect the more familiar Arabic and Urdu. The white children, by contrast, encountered a great deal more text at nursery than at home. The environment, in short, appeared to operate for the children as a marker of the boundary between home and school. It also operated to mark contrasts and boundaries between children with different languages. Only rarely were any signs displayed in anything other than English. On the few occasions that they were written in Urdu, they were only in Urdu. The provision of a sign in only one language could be seen to suggest the use of language to mark boundaries and exclusion rather than broker and create leaching between the text experiences of the children.

The organisation of the nursery day emphasised independence and children freely choosing their activities. In this it could be seen to reflect Edwards' contention (2005) that many models of early childhood development and education continue to reflect a construction of childhood emanating from the ideas of Rousseau (1993) and developed by Froebel (2003), Isaacs (1968) and Montessori (1975), which holds that development and learning occur naturally and that children learn and development best when their activities are freely chosen. Added to these, are the discourses of developmental psychology (see, for example, Piaget, 1975) which are considered by Grieshaber and Cannella (2001) to seek to explain the individual from within in terms of internal processes which are understood as universal scientific truths which, therefore, explain everybody. The role of the teacher in this model of nursery education is to provide the environment and

to facilitate, a role clearly outlined by Rousseau (1993, 66): 'give your scholar no verbal lessons; he should be taught by experience alone'.

These free play activities were interrupted by occasional 'focused' activities, which the children were required to take part in, and by compulsory small group sessions which involved milk, fruit, stories and some early literacy and numeracy work. In this sense the nursery's practices reflected more recent ideas, such as those of Vygotsky (1978) and Bruner (2004) about the significance of adults in shaping children's understanding. They also reflected England's *Curriculum Guidance for the Foundation Stage* (QCA, 2000) with its particular emphasis on 'using conversation and carefully framed questions because this is crucial in developing children's knowledge' (22). The *Early Years Foundation Stage* materials (DfES, 2007a, 2007b), which have superseded the *Curriculum Guidance*, also reflect some social constructivist ideas, stating, for example, 'with effective adult support, children can: explore, develop and represent learning experiences that help them to make sense of the world; practise and build up ideas, concepts and skills' (DfES, 2007b, 7). Bruner's notion (2004) of scaffolding children's learning is evident here and has become influential in England in the past twenty or so years but the *Early Years Foundation Stage* also places an even greater emphasis than previously on notions such as stages of development and developmentally appropriate practice, bearing out Kwon's contention (2002, 6.) that 'sequential developmentalism is one of the most influential beliefs in English early years education'. There persists, therefore, as argued by Robbins (2005), Walsh (2005) and Edwards (2007), a commitment amongst many early childhood educators, policy makers and some researchers to a universal notion of development that focuses on the individual child but which is held to apply to all children in whatever context.

In terms of the experiences the nursery offered, as is often found in Western child-centred early childhood education, there was a home corner, with a kitchen and bedroom, and this was reasonably typical of the homes of most of the children, even if they may have been puzzled by the absence of a sitting room and bathroom. The traditional home corner owes much to the

ideas of Montessori (1975) with her belief that: 'a school, a place built for children, must have furniture and equipment scaled to the proper size and adapted to their physical strength, so that they can move it with the same ease with which we move the furniture in our homes' (Montessori, 1975, 96). There were many items and labels from local supermarkets and the kitchen equipment was drawn from a number of different cultures and so at least some of it would have been familiar to the children. Early in the year, the dolls and dressing up clothes were almost all representative only of white-indigenous culture but, as the staff became clearer about the focus of my research, they realised that they had very few dolls and dressing up clothes to represent other ethnic and cultural origins and some were bought and added to the home corner later in the year. In this sense, my presence and research interests influenced practice but, overall, the nursery was one that reflected a white, female, liberal, middle-class notion of what a suitable environment for young children should look like and contain, much in the way noted by Fler (2003) and Robinson and Diaz (2006). During the period of the fieldwork, the nursery was redecorated in complementary shades of lilac and green, with matching display boards, perhaps reinforcing the feminised and Western environment that the children experienced.

There was also a role play area, as in many nurseries, but this was often unrepresentative of the prior experiences of the majority of the children. Early in the spring term, it was set up as a travel agent, with brochures of skiing holidays, which would have been familiar to only a very small number of (more affluent white-indigenous) children. Later in the spring term, it became a greengrocer's shop. Some of the children of white-indigenous heritage understood some of the language and conventions required of greengrocers' shops. These practices were not well understood by other children, as we see in the following extract:

Jamie *Can I have some milk?*

Josh *... I haven't got no milk (checking trolley drawers)*

Jamie *They haven't got milk and they haven't got DVDs at that shop*
(Kelvin comes in)

Kelvin *Say how much is it*

(Myra comes in)

Kelvin *Excuse me – what would you like to buy?*

Melanie *I'd like some carrots and toast – I don't need to buy all them things*

Kelvin *You want toast? – there's no toast here!*

(Adnaan comes and goes behind counter and helps himself)

Josh *(to Adnaan) Give ME that bag – you've got to buy it!*

Adult *I know it's a British thing but it would be much easier if you would stand in a line*

In seeking to analyse episodes such as this, Lave and Wenger's (1991) notion of legitimate peripheral participation and Wenger's (1998) concept of communities of practice are considered useful in providing a framework within which to explore the way in which the children's previous experiences and the practices of the nursery school interacted to shape the children's early engagements with early childhood education. Lave and Wenger's theory (1991) was developed from research with apprentice tailors and explored the ways in which they initially engaged in legitimate peripheral participation in the community of practice of tailors, undertaking non-crucial tasks, that would not put the entire undertaking at risk if not completed wholly successfully, progressing to full participation. Rogoff et al (2003) add the insight that, in the early stages of participation, children learn by intently observing and listening in on adults and other children. How well individuals are able to observe and listen is likely to influence how effectively and how quickly they learn, an important consideration given that some of the children in the present study are likely be to better placed to listen than others, depending on their language competence in English.

In the case of the shop, on this and many similar occasions, children of Pakistani-heritage came to the role play area and watched but had none of the language or skills to be able to join in or sought to do so by taking foods without asking for them, as we saw above, thereby upsetting the white-indigenous children and members of staff. In so doing they became 'othered' as not knowing what to do or how to behave in the way that Robinson and Diaz (2006) note. This is not to argue that the children of Pakistani-heritage do not go shopping but that their experiences appeared not to be of queuing up in a shop that sold only fruit and vegetables. Whilst they may have had experience of shops where people served themselves and which also sold toast, milk and DVDs, this experience was not legitimised. It is doubtful that the children of white indigenous-heritage had experienced shops that only served fruit and vegetables either but the adults modelled the behaviours that they expected to see, emphasising, in the case of the member of staff in this extract that 'I know it's a British thing but it would be much easier if you would stand in a line'. Whilst the children for whom English was their first language were able to access and engage in the language and behaviour practices required by the nursery in relation to shopping, few of those of Pakistani-heritage could and so behaved in ways that were considered inappropriate by the staff and by the children of white-indigenous origin.

Wenger's insight (1998) is helpful here with his contention that we experience who we are in part through awareness of who and what we are not. Non-participation in a community of practice is seen as taking different forms which are more or less significant. Not to participate in a community of practice that is glimpsed but not central to one's practice is less significant than not being able to participate in a community of practice where one would expect to have a role to play. Peripherality is understood by Wenger as a part of a staged journey to participation but marginality arises from the road to participation being blocked off. Non-participation can emerge from institutional practices as a strategic response from those involved to the institution and its values. It can also be a way of dealing with difficult situations that one does not have the power or influence to change. In the

example above, the lack of qualifying experience and lack of the necessary language skills needed for legitimate participation meant that participation was illegitimate and became disruption. As such, the children were marked out negatively as 'other' in contrast to those few more affluent white-indigenous children who were seen to participate more appropriately in the nursery's community of play practices. This is a particular concern because of the danger of the children then being stereotyped as disruptive on the basis of their language skills, heritage and racial background.

Even where language was not a barrier, there were a number of occasions where experiences appeared culturally specific and were not well understood by the children. During story times, many of the children of Pakistani-heritage initially referred to the members of staff as 'teacher' but were told 'not teacher – call me Mrs...'. Fler (2006) draws attention to similar corrections in her research with minority groups in Australia and refers to the ways in which early childhood educators see the use of individual names of people and staff as important whilst the community valued the identification of relationships, pointing to fossilized behaviours leading to a lack of understanding on both sides. One side had more power than the other, however, and, as Fler (2006, 199) observes, 'What constitutes legitimate knowledge, skills, beliefs, values is politically driven; when it does not match mainstream practices, it is filtered out via the classroom door.'

It was evident also, however, that meanings are not entirely language constructs as many post-structuralists (such as Derrida, 2002) would maintain and depend on other outward manifestations and the complexity of senses that construct human experience. Activities that the children were expected to engage in early in their time at nursery included hand painting and outdoor play with sand but, even when explained in Punjabi, these were experiences that seemed very unfamiliar and which some of the children of Pakistani-heritage resisted, suggesting, perhaps, that the previous experiences of some of the children of Pakistani-heritage had not involved hand painting or sand play. Such children were then seen as being deficient in some way without it being recognised that the practice was based on a particular model of early

childhood education and the concern was to find ways of making them participate. In Western child-centred early years education, hand painting and outdoor sand play are perhaps concerned with experimentation and getting dirty and with success in an activity where fine motor control is not necessary and these are cultural meanings which may not have been available to or understood by the children. Thus their experience and participation is likely to be different in kind from that of the children of white-indigenous heritage who have previously had such experiences.

In these situations, the bilingual staff could be seen as having a key brokering role at the boundary moments. Boundary practices may be concerned with 'a form of collective brokering' (Wenger, 1998, 114) that seeks to resolve conflicts between different practices. The bilingual staff were placed as peripheral brokers, part inside and part outside the dominant discourses of early childhood education. Certainly they played an important linguistic role in terms of helping the children to understand the activities. Wenger (1998) draws attention to the complexity of brokering, however, and to the significance of those carrying out the brokering having sufficient 'legitimacy' to influence practice and resolve contradiction and disagreement. Their relatively junior position in the nursery's hierarchy and their shifting insider/outsider position in relation to the white middle-class practices of early years education and their ethnic, cultural and linguistic heritage meant, however, that whilst a key brokering role might have been to help the children avoid alienation or 'disidentification' (Hodges, 1998) in the first place by suggesting more culturally understandable activities, this was not realised.

These contrasts in familiarity with the practices of white Western child-centred early childhood education seemed to result, therefore, in differences in how readily the children settled in to nursery. Whilst most children of white-indigenous heritage engaged readily with the nursery's experiences, a minority of children of Pakistani-heritage stood at the margins. Whilst they did seek contact with the staff, they were often reluctant to play with any of the equipment or materials, appearing not to know how to engage with the environment in which they found themselves. Most of these children

eventually joined in but a few only began to engage in the nursery's activities after almost a year. It is important, however, to be aware here of the dangers of seeing the children's behaviour as passive. Individualism, independence and free choice need to be, but rarely are, considered as culturally driven notions and it may be that the children's previous experience had involved being directed or making decisions alongside others in their family. Fler (2003) and Rogoff et al (2003) note the way in which Western child-centred education privileges practical activity and 'doing', based on the ideas of Piaget, but recognise that this is merely a cultural way of understanding young children and it is not necessarily shared or understood or valued across different cultures. They also draw attention to the importance of what Rogoff et al (2003) term 'intent observation' in cultures in which children are a part of, rather than separated from, the adult world, as they so often are in the West. Whilst it does seem likely that the children were seeking to observe in order to understand, there are still issues to be considered in relation to an environment and set of practices that could be considered to make it difficult for the children to enter as legitimate participants.

Staff members paid little attention to ethnicity as a factor in children's access to activities and this had significant implications in terms of participation. It was not that the staff were uncaring towards the children who found it difficult to participate. Rather like those in Duncan et al's study (2008, 116) 'while the adults ... were supportive and interactive ... the structuralarrangements cut acrossopportunities for meaningful engagement in the places, people or things within (the) learning environments'. Whilst legitimate participation was available to all of the children through their very presence, participation was limited for some of the children and the move to full participation was most readily available for white girls who most easily adapted to the conventions of the early childhood environment created. It could be argued that a denial of legitimate participation is the basis for discrimination on the grounds of race or gender or class. When the lack of opportunities for participation and the lack of ethnic mix in activities were discussed with the staff, they were surprised by my observations but seemed to think it natural that the groups did not mix. This lack of integration was most evident in children's freely chosen activities and these were the ones in

which they engaged most of the time. The only real directed activities were those that occurred during the structured small group time and in these situations there was more mixing. Macro level influences were evident here, however, because government and local authority policies meant that story groups were organised in terms of English language competence, which led to a separation of the ethnic groups in many of the story sessions. Thus the children were provided with very few examples of adults and the institution of the nursery seeking to create a community in which the different ethnic groups could interact.

Activities related to major religious celebrations did bring the groups together. However, Christmas activities went on for several weeks whilst those for Eid were much less extensive. Despite the ethnic mix of the nursery, a nativity play was still performed for the parents though few of those of Pakistani-heritage attended. The head teacher explained that Christmas was seen as such an important part of the culture of school life and that its significance as a cultural and religious event was simply taken for granted and planned for in a way that the celebration of Eid was not. As noted by MacNaughton and Hughes (2007), there was little consideration of the effects of this lack of awareness on the children and parents. Perhaps greater thought to the appropriateness for the children concerned of particular practices would lead to fewer boundary moments, fewer occurrences of marginalisation. This points to the invisibility of whiteness (Dyer, 1997, Ahmed, 2004) and its customs, beliefs and values because, even in settings where everyone is not white, being white is seen as the norm and is a veiled silence (Mazzei, 2003) that is not remarked upon. The head teacher did also say that the staff had been discussing the meaning of Christmas in a nursery attended by a majority of children of Pakistani-heritage. She said that the dilemma was really that most of the staff were practising Christians who attended church regularly and felt that their beliefs were compromised if they did not provide (colonize?) the children with opportunities to understand and celebrate the meaning of Christmas. Despite the resulting marginalisation for many of the children, the staff seemed to consider their beliefs more significant than the ability of the children to participate.

In discussion with the rest of the staff, two of the three teachers questioned the relevance of Christmas celebrations whilst the nursery nurses felt that the time and festivities were appropriate and helped develop the children's confidence, which was seen as important, without recognising that the desirability of confidence is itself a cultural construct. Two of the bilingual assistants said that Muslim parents were quite happy for Christmas to be celebrated because they had come to understand the significance that Christmas has in schools. Whilst Wenger would seek to explain this primarily in terms of the local, this pays insufficient attention to the ways in which macro level influences affect the micro. Foucault's (1998, 2002) focus on the operation of power from the macro level is considered helpful here in beginning to articulate how our experiences are constructed through the historically, politically, culturally and socially determined discourses that operate in society and which determine how the world is understood. These discourses function through all forms of symbolic representation, particularly language, and it is through these discourses that individuals take up positions in the world and are positioned or do not take up positions and are excluded. Perhaps the concerns of the teachers but not of the bilingual assistants point to the ways in which suggesting resistance is easier for those with more power, whilst those with less power learn to perform what they perceive the dominant culture expects and come to see this as part of who they are. As Foucault (2002, 120) argues 'what makes power hold good ... is ... that it doesn't only weigh on us as a force that says no it induces pleasure ...'.

Another bilingual nursery nurse talked about the way that 'Asian parents just can't be bothered' and this was why they did not come to the Christmas concert. In so doing, she appeared to seek to 'other' (Foucault, 2002) the Pakistani community as different from her, reflecting both a shifting ethnic identity and mobility in terms of her status and greater affluence that marked her out differently in class terms. She was both an insider and an outsider in terms of how she viewed the parents. They commented that she 'should know that we were getting ready for Eid' that year, and that was why they had not attended the concert, suggesting that that they saw her as both

an insider and an outsider in relation to them since she was now a part of a predominantly white nursery team. Brah's insight (1996, 175) is significant when she suggests that

'The boundaries of ethnicity may be drawn around a variety of criteria – language, religion, memories of a shared history and visions of a shared destiny, a belief in common origins – so that one may be positioned within more than one field of ethnicity depending upon the criteria at play within a particular context. The processes of boundary construction and the specific criteria invoked in a given situation are subject to political, cultural and economic contingencies.'

There are echoes here of the way in which Wenger (1998) refers to the interstices where people are partly inside but also partly outside and connected with other communities of practice. In this sense, someone such as a bilingual nursery nurse who has accessed some of the practices of the dominant discourses of early childhood education may be considered to have some influence on the negotiation of new meanings in relation to how ethnic identity is experienced and perceived but this may be difficult in the face of a lack of status, reification of what is considered desirable and the operation of power to suggest the benefits of compliance.

Rediscovering mutual engagement

Whilst the small scale of my research is acknowledged and its findings in many ways limited to the context of the particular nursery, there are, perhaps, professional implications that reach beyond the local, through what Brown and Duguid (2000) term 'networks of practice'. Participation, it is argued, is to be understood as an ontological imperative, without which marginalisation and discrimination occur, and so some very significant issues emerge which need consideration and negotiation. How far participation is possible, appears to depend on the extent to which the established community is willing to 'open doors to let the newcomer get access' (Blaka

and Filstad, 2007, 67). There were many occasions in the present study when, generally through lack of awareness, the doors were firmly shut, especially for some children from the most traditional and least affluent Pakistani-heritage homes. In adult communities, according to Blaka and Filstad (2007), a significant part of the learning process is for the newcomer to seek to understand 'the institutionalised ways of behaving, of thinking and of solving problems, and being able to pose the relevant questions' (69) and they consider that the most successful entrants to a new community of practice are those who are most proactive but this poses considerable challenges when the task involves young children and entails seeking to enter communities of white, middle-class early childhood education practice which have become ossified.

In the present study, the discourses of child-centred education, with the emphasis on particular environments and provision, the significance of adult-child interaction and the importance of children's 'needs' (all of them constructed in a white, liberal, middle class model) appear to have become a reified community of practice, much in the way suggested by Fleer (2003), with few possibilities for mutual engagement in determining meanings because these have become taken for granted. These discourses and practices underpin the new Early Years Foundation Stage in England but 'are significant not only for what they explicitly produce, but also for what they silence and marginalise' (Ailwood, 2003, 295). Cannella and Viruru (2004, 95) argue that 'child-centeredness creates the illusion of freedom to function and think in theoretically predetermined direction and using Euro-American, male rationalism. For those of us who are not male, not White, not adult, not always labelled as rational must ask how can this be freedom?' These were very important matters in my research given the ethnicities of the children being studied.

There is, therefore, a key need for those who operate on the peripheries of overlapping communities of practice, such as bilingual staff, to be supported in working as brokers. They have a significant brokering role to play between those who invite participation and those children who are at risk

of marginalisation. This role needs to involve the development of shared cultural resources which enable children to move towards full participation without experiencing disidentification. As in the present study, bilingual staff are frequently some of the least qualified in early childhood settings and their lack of qualifications also means that they lack power to influence practices. In England, the Sector-Endorsed Early Years Foundation degree is the most popular route to a higher education qualification for staff but there has been little success with recruiting and retaining students of South-Asian heritage (Snape et al, 2007), perhaps pointing to exclusion from educational communities of practice. There is, therefore, also a need for higher education to be more accommodating of the needs of such staff in order to support them in gaining additional qualifications that will enable them to access more influential roles.

What is also needed is a reconsideration of the type of environment that is created for the children in their early experiences of nursery education. The new Early Years Foundation Stage materials (DfES, 2007a&b) suggest that 'all children, irrespective of ethnicity, culture or religion, home language, family backgroundshould have the opportunity to experience a challenging and enjoyable programme of learning and development (DfES, 2007a, 10) and make the apparently simple exhortation that 'an appropriate environment is essential ... reasonable adjustments must be made so that premises ... reflect the ethnic, cultural and social diversity in society (DfES, 2007b, 18). However, this is far more complex than it might seem. As Fler (2006) and Ryan and Grieshaber (2005) recognise, so often in early childhood education there is too little recognition that cultural practices are not shared and too little clarity about the socio-cultural resources that children from different backgrounds bring to the experience of early childhood education.

In order to do this in ways that are genuinely inclusive of the local community, there is a need for the staff to develop more detailed knowledge about the children and their families. Home visits, in this study, gathered information that was considered useful and also gave information about the nursery but the visits were not primarily about negotiating the starting school

experience but about informing parents about organisation and expectations and judging how well the children and families were likely to 'measure up'. This rather echoes the new *Early Years Foundation Stage* (DfES, 2007a&b) which refers to the importance of partnership with parents, but this partnership is conceived of as involving 'sharing information and offering support to learning in the home' (DfES, 2007b, 10). There is little or no recognition of partnership as a two-way learning process, with the emphasis being rather on schools working with parents to enable them to support their children in ways that schools see as helpful. A longer period of visiting may be helpful in enabling the staff to gain more knowledge of the children and their homes. This longer period of visiting could usefully also involve parents spending more time with their children when they first start to attend nursery in order that border work can be carried out that enables seepage between the different communities of practice in ways that start to shape new local communities. In the nursery environment itself, there seems to be a need to ensure: that spoken and written language reflects home and community practices; that decoration, furnishings, and food are reflective of the children's previous cultural experiences; that activities and experiences are congruent with what children will have experienced at home; and that religious and cultural events are reflective of the whole community.

Staff development and work with parents and the local community is needed for 'making visible fossilized early childhood practices and for re-imagining new practices and beliefs' (Fleer, 2006, 193) that reflect a broader range of perspectives. Edwards (2006) argues that this can only be brought about through 'appropriate, sensitive, and extensive professional learning to allow educators the opportunity to examine their existing beliefs and clarify the understandings they hold regarding key concepts and terms utilized in early childhood education' (248.) There is, in other words, a clear need for far-reaching professional development that creates a discursive space that allows early childhood educators to examine how learning, children, families and communities are being constructed in early childhood education. This needs to enable early childhood educators to 'resist the regulatory gaze' (Osgood, 2006) and reflect upon the beliefs inherent in the new *Early Years Foundation*

Stage (DfES, 2007a&b), the environment that is created and the experiences that are provided in order to consider what these say and suggest about the children, families and communities with whom they work and how appropriate they are to the local context. The challenges are heightened by the need to re-imagine and engage with new possibilities whilst at the same time working critically with them as they become reified in order to avoid the creation of new inscriptions, new orthodoxies. Care needs to be taken to ensure legitimate participation in re-imagining those possibilities in order to avoid the danger that parents and the local community are homogenised and also that the local community is not colonised in order to appropriate something of what the community has and early childhood educators perceive that they need.

It may be that all of this is challenging and uncomfortable, involving, as it does, the questioning of old certainties in relation to children, their development, families and backgrounds, child-rearing practices, gender, religion, culture, friendships and early childhood educational practices. As Fler (2003, 2006) and Ryan and Grieshaber (2005) also recognise, this may involve real dilemmas in engaging with beliefs and values that are at odds with and strongly opposed by white, liberal, middle-class, child-centred early childhood education. This is likely to be no easy task given that, as Cannella and Viruru recognise (2004, 5) 'to many it is offensive and insulting to suggest that the work that one has spent a lifetime (in many cases) doing, with great honesty and sincerity, can be called colonizing'. In short, it requires a willingness to entertain entry into diasporic educational spaces that provide for the negotiation of new practices in early childhood settings that better reflect the coming together of different and shifting ethnic, cultural, class, religious and educational concerns.

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